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Book Reviews

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Review of *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* by Melinda Cooper (Zone Books)

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ABSTRACT *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. By Melinda Cooper. New York: Zone Books, 2017, 416 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 978 1 9354 08840. US List: \$29.95. In an academic world flush with and made into silos by specialized topics, research articles, and books, Melinda Cooper's interdisciplinary integration is a most welcome map of the [...]

Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism. By Melinda Cooper. New York: Zone Books, 2017, 416 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 978 1 9354 08840. US List: \$29.95.

In an academic world flush with and made into silos by specialized topics, research articles, and books, Melinda Cooper's interdisciplinary integration is a most welcome map of the historical and contemporary forces that created political alliances between neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Tracing neoliberalism and neoconservatism's shared normative cultural understanding of family as heterosexual and essentially patriarchal, Cooper's meticulously researched book successfully documents the political forces and moments that altered the current landscape of social welfare, healthcare, and educational debt in the United States. Neoliberals and neoconservatives found common political cause in privatization of these areas through the vehicle of the family rather than through the government. Those who were politically aware and active from the 1960s through the 1980s will find themselves remembering many of these events and moments, but Cooper offers broader historical insights of their scope and implications. Those who grew up later and became politically active from the 1990s onward will be relieved that someone finally has decoded and documented so thoroughly the routes and signposts of the sociocultural political map in these historical areas. This book promises to be a classic study of the role that the family played in fomenting alliances between neoconservatives and neoliberals. Many academic disciplines beyond cultural studies may find particular chapters helpful in the classroom as well.

The integrative scope of Cooper's lens allows her to demonstrate nuanced understanding with ease between topics as diverse as economics, politics, theology, history, gender, race, education, sexuality, debt, welfare, and AIDS. At the same time, she succeeds in making the complex intertwining of these topics digestible and concrete for the reader in ways that keep them engaged throughout, including digging into her amply generous footnotes for more tidbits. Throughout these topics, the thread that links neoliberals and neoconservatives consistently is their shared concern, often for different reasons and values, to regulate the family as a foundational structural unit of society. The family thus

becomes a shared referent for social regulation of sexuality, health, debt, and welfare—either for economic purposes or for religious and moral ends. This culturally common normative focal point fosters seemingly unusual or unexpected political alliances grounded in repeated patterns of legally implemented social control—even when the normative conception of family eventually expands beyond solely a heteropatriarchal form. Cooper’s particular talent is her capacity to expose these subtle patterns, their magnitude and implications, turning seemingly very odd political bedfellows into partners that make complete political sense, even if frightening in their depth of sense for some of us.

Cooper begins her book first by building an argument for the significance of the institution of the family as a ready-made focal point in history during times of economic and religious or moral turbulence. Her historical starting point is the creation of the Elizabethan Poor Law in 1601 in England as a national welfare system. She discusses the various ways this type of poor law, when transplanted to the United States, repeatedly has been recreated and reformed over time:

From the very beginning, the Poor Law enforcement of labor and family obligations worked hand in hand. When it came to adapting the laws and statutes of the Old World to the new American colonies, each of the thirteen states ended up replicating the Elizabethan Poor Law almost *in toto*, retaining many of the family responsibility provisions written into the original act. Every one of the colonies enacted criminal penalties against unmarried sex and civil laws requiring putative fathers to support illegitimate children. These laws seem to have applied most rigorously to indentured servants, again with the express aim of relieving local authorities of the burden of support...When the Civil War ended and former slaves were declared free laborers, they, too, came under the purview of newly invented family responsibility laws. As this history demonstrates, the poor laws were not only imported intact from England but were subsequently reinvented many times over as a means of disciplining new kinds of sexual and economic freedom. (74–75)

Cooper goes on to discuss the ways the Freedman Bureau, created in 1865, would “vigorous[ly] campaign to promote marriage among slaves” and how “agents were authorized to perform wedding ceremonies, to certify or dissolve informal unions that had begun before emancipation, and to track down spouses who had been forcibly separated by slave masters” (79). The ongoing regulative significance of the family as an instrument of state control used to shift the burden of economic support from the state onto a religiously sanctified social institution becomes clearer and clearer. Many state legislatures across the South followed suit in enacting and expanding these laws even after the closure of the Freedman Bureau. Cooper’s tracing of these historical-political practices could be placed fruitfully into dialogue with theologian Kelly Brown Douglas’ work, *What’s Faith God To Do With It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005). Douglas traces and deconstructs the development of white Christian cultural ideology, including family gender roles, and its internalization by African American slaves during and post-Civil War. In this regard, Cooper’s book is a valuable supplement documenting the role of the state in fostering this cultural understanding of family through political practices.

Cooper continues her book by focusing on three major ongoing points of convergence in the social and moral control of economics, health, and sexuality when neoliberals and neoconservatives alike were able to draw upon the normative ideal of a heteropatriarchal family. These convergence points are illustrated in one chapter’s focus on inherited wealth, another’s on the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, and a third on the rise of student and family debt. Throughout these chapters, she carefully demonstrates the long-term

formative impact of this convergence on the structural inequalities that pervade our contemporary situation. For example, in her chapter on inherited wealth, it is well known that the federal government underwrote the construction of housing and the suburbs for a white heteropatriarchal normative family from the post-WWII era into the 1960s. Cooper further nuances the structural intersectionality of these legacies:

Federal housing policies, moreover, were not simply racializing but also tightly bound up with the normative regulation of gender and sexuality...A white man tied to the responsibilities of work and family was considered the most creditworthy of borrowers and the most insurable of risks; a single white man might have enjoyed more financial independence but was less likely to respect his long term obligations; a single working woman was in general barred from receiving any form of consumer credit in her own name. The standardization of consumer risk profiles relegated borrowers to a continuum of more or less insurable risks—with women, homosexuals, and the nonwhite defined as outliers on the bell-curve of credit risks. This premium placed on marital status within FHA lending criteria was supplemented by more overt forms of exclusion directed toward homosexuals... (146–47)

Federally fostered wealth accumulation through the savings bank of one's house not only excluded certain groups along the lines of race, gender, and sexual orientation, it also fostered social networking and thereby social capital among normative white heteropatriarchal families by virtue of their being clustered in suburban spaces.

Cooper's chapters on the 1980s AIDS crisis and the rise of family and student debt are filled with numerous such additional intersectional insights worth reading word for word. Each could stand alone as a chapter excerpt for a class utilizing such political and policy cultural case studies. She closes with a chapter on the role of public theology in shaping the contemporary faith-based welfare state, examining the rise of religious nonprofits and programs in public welfare arenas, such as providing services in prisons, homeless shelters, and other needed areas in the wake of deinstitutionalization of hospitals. Along the way, she documents how the religious right learned to use the same civil rights legal tools that the left had first utilized to expand welfare rights and dismantle structural racism in order to now challenge these same laws in the name of religious freedom. Such challenges emerged as a response to being denied the same opportunity for state and federal funding of welfare initiatives as secular groups and also to being required to follow anti-discrimination clauses viewed as infringing on religious freedom. Cooper points out that "Not only have Christian litigators borrowed the tools of their enemies, but they also have turned these tools against them—deploying religious freedom to annul the jurisprudence of sexual freedom and religious antidiscrimination laws to override the gender-based protections of a previous era" (304–5).

At the same time that neoconservatives were turning to legal strategies, neoliberals became interested in the sociological concept of "mediating structures" of civil society—such as family, church, and community mediating between an individual's private and public life—as promoted by sociologist Peter Berger and theologian Richard John Neuhaus. Here a sociologist, concerned about secularization, and a theologian found neoliberal common ground. Berger and Neuhaus' conception of mediating structures also found common ground with neoconservatives. Combining neoconservative legal challenges to religious freedom and neoliberal motivations of economic cost savings and moral investment allowed more and more services to be turned over to religious organizations, often with evangelical agendas. For those who continue to adhere to the stock story that there really is a separation of church and state in the United States, Cooper's book successfully adds to works dispelling this myth. It uncovers the many

concealed stories in our history of the ongoing connection and intertwining of church and state.

Cooper's nuanced understanding that evangelicals also can be on a spectrum from right to left lends greater insight to, for instance, the power of the Moral Monday and Repairer of the Breach movement today, led by Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II. Analysis of this movement may be a good way to update her study. Regarding the evangelical left, Cooper states that its political power was compromised by its prior commitments to pro-life stances and opposition to marriage equality. Drawing on the power of fusion politics, Barber and his political and religious partners have demonstrated their willingness to stride this divide in full support of women's reproductive rights as well as the LGBTQ community, including challenges to the so-called "bathroom bill" in North Carolina on behalf of transgender rights. I wonder what Cooper might make of this new religious coalition and its challenges to structural inequalities at the national level for healthcare and their commitment to renewing Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor Peoples Campaign. Does a religious fusion politics of the left constitute a new or even radical variable in the mix today?

It is impossible to give this brilliant and richly researched book its full due in a short book review. I am confident, however, that this is a book that will reside comfortably on a shelf with other classics that provide ongoing depth of historical, political, and cultural insight into our contemporary struggles with structural oppressions. I often thought most recently of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* while reading Cooper's text, and how Cooper supplies added integrative value to Alexander's work. Again, this book should be widely read by academics and students of fields as far ranging as cultural and sociological studies, social work, ministry, public healthcare advocates, student debt and union advocates, etc. Individual chapters could be pulled out for powerful educational use. This is not a book that will provide you with an easy map of strategies out of our current struggles, yet if we do not accurately map and know our history, we will inevitably continue to repeat its patterns. I am grateful and excited for Cooper's contributions to an ever more accurate historical map.

 [Bio](#)

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Rev. Dr. Michelle Walsh, LICSW is a licensed independent clinical social worker and a Lecturer at the Boston University School of Social Work. She holds a PhD in Practical Theology and is the author of *Violent Trauma, Culture, and Power: An Interdisciplinary Exploration in Lived Religion*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017. She also is ordained in the Unitarian Universalist tradition.

